

Jesse Swinson: The Hidden Soldier of Goshen Swamp

By: Charles Harrison Bell

If you are driving along Norwood Ezzell Road, nothing out of the ordinary would stand out to you. In this section of rural Duplin County called Goshen Swamp, you mostly have fields and farmland. So, a small grove of trees standing behind a modern farmhouse certainly blends right into its surroundings. But this particular grove of trees holds a hidden gem. It comes in the form of an old gravestone. So old, in fact, that over the years it has been broken and reassembled many times. But when a grave is so old that it belongs to a Revolutionary War soldier, you can be sure it is fragile. This particular grave belongs to Jesse Swinson; my sixth-generation great-grandfather and, just as importantly, a Revolutionary War veteran.

The story of Jesse Swinson is a simple one, but significant to the revolutionary history of North Carolina. At the age of 19, Jesse, a native North Carolinian, began his first of five war tours with the Duplin Militia. According to his pension record ^[1], which is preserved in the National Archives in Washington, Jesse served twice as a volunteer and musician, twice as a draftee, and once as a paid substitute. He initially volunteered for service in 1778, two years after American colonists signed the Declaration of Independence and just after General Cornwallis had marched through Duplin County heading towards Virginia. Jesse's first two tours with the Duplin County Militia were mostly a series of uneventful marches, aside from a few warning shots fired by the British as the militia approached Wilmington. His third tour was slightly more eventful. He was drafted back into the Duplin Militia and marched to the Big Pee Dee River in South Carolina. Along the way, several British soldiers were taken prisoner and Jesse was dispatched to march the prisoners back to New Bern. His final two tours took him closer to my home in Rolesville, North Carolina. In April 1781, Jesse was drafted into the Franklin County Dragoons, a mounted infantry which rallied at Louisburg (approximately 15 miles from Rolesville) and traveled across much of

1. Jesse Swinson, private, Revolutionary War, Pension Application S7670, National Archives, Washington, DC

central and eastern North Carolina. His fifth and final tour was as a paid volunteer with the Dragoons. He completed this tour in November of 1781, one month after Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown.

I chose this particular marker, not just because of the connection with my family history, but because it provides a rare, first-hand insight into how the war specifically looked in southeastern North Carolina. Based on Jesse's first two tours, as noted in *Three Generations of Swinson Kin* ^[2], we can infer that the Duplin Militia did not participate in large, orchestrated battles; instead, they mostly dealt with a series of skirmishes, alarms, marches and countermarches. Jesse's third tour, which involved guarding British prisoners, also indicates that the biggest threats for southeastern North Carolinians were "from British soldiers who occupied Wilmington and their Tory allies in Duplin and elsewhere"^[2]. Essentially, Jesse had a greater risk of being attacked by a Loyalist neighbor than fighting in a major battle. His story also gives insight into young patriot men at the time. It is obvious that Jesse felt a sincere loyalty to the newborn nation of America and a strong desire to protect his property, but he also exhibits a tremendous desire for adventure. "For many young men, enlisting not only gave them steady employment, but also the opportunity for excitement, adventure and promises of land and cash bonuses" (*Museum of the American Revolution, n.d.*)^[3]. Unfortunately, many of those men discovered that the reality of war was far from the exciting adventure they imagined. Nevertheless, for Jesse Swinson, the war allowed him to travel hundreds of miles, see new places and return home safely.

That small gravestone in Goshen Swamp is more than just a site-marker. It is a treasured lesson in North Carolina history. Local figures like Jesse Swinson often go unnoticed or forgotten, so I am proud to tell his story. Though he may not be considered a war hero, it is stories like his that help us understand our roots as North Carolinians.

2. Swinson Book Committee. (2007). *Three Centuries of Swinson Kin*. Swinson Family Association.

3. Museum of the American Revolution. (n.d.). *Big Idea 3: Soldiers of the Revolutionary War*. Retrieved from <https://www.amrevmuseum.org/big-idea-3-soldiers-of-the-revolutionary-war>

References

1. Jesse Swinson, private, Revolutionary War, Pension Application S7670, National Archives, Washington, DC
2. Swinson Book Committee. (2009). *Three Centuries of Swinson Kin*. Swinson Family Association.
3. Museum of the American Revolution. (n.d.). *Big Idea 3: Soldiers of the Revolutionary War*. Retrieved from <https://www.amrevmuseum.org/big-idea-3-soldiers-of-the-revolutionary-war>.